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ABSTRACT

The study of Afro-American writers in American literature courses has experienced a noticeable decline since 1972. The most ignored of black literature is that written during the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most outstanding examples of black literature from that period were the "slave narratives," autobiographies by exslaves from which emerged a consistent picture of the brutality slaves experienced from a point of view rarely made known to the reading public. Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Henry Bibb are black authors of some better known narratives. Black folk tales and folk songs were also prevalent during the nineteenth century, dealing mainly with the blacks' use of cunning and deception to survive. Nineteenth century black American writers wrote of life as they experienced it. To continue to deny their literary contributions is to deny all Americans a true understanding of our heritage. (Excerpts from works by authors mentioned as well as those of other authors are included.) (HTH)

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AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE OF THE 19th CENTURY: A FOCUS FOR THE 80's

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Shortly after rioting broke out in the Liberty City area of Miami in the Spring of 1980, an associated Press-NBC poll was conducted to examine public reaction to the latest racial turbulence. Only 24 percent of those surveyed said that the Liberty City troubles were caused by localized problems; 76 percent felt that similar problems existed in cities throughout the country. The story of Liberty City was very well presented in a photo essay, "Miami: Roots of Rage", published in the September, 1980 issue of Ebony magazine. The essay, compiled by Monetta Sleet, portrayed Miami as "a mood, a metaphor, a warning and a summons". Sleet raised the question: "Will the power-brokers responsible for the deferment of the Dream look and listen this time .... before it's too late?"

That question has great significance for all who are involved in the field of education. In the late 1960's many educators made a committment to introducing or expanding courses involving Black Studies, but in many cases this committment has all but disappeared. In his article "Education and the New Generation," published in the August, 1978 issue of Ebony magazine, Alex Poinsett made the following rather grim observation on the status of Black Studies:

> By the mid 1970's the Black Studies crusade, which had launched academic programs at about 500 of the nation's 3,000 college and universities, gradually fizzled out as white college administrators quietly reneged on solemn commitments made to Black students in the heat of battle.

The phrase, "heat of battle" obviously refers to the late 1960's when Black students at colleges and universities throughout the country began to demand courses relevant to their background and needs. They wanted to study and read about Black American's contributions to the humanities, the physical sciences, the social sciences - to all fields of human endeavor. They did not appreciate being forced to study textbooks from which their contributions had been obliterated.

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American Literature was one field which Black students were particularly

interested in examining. A major function of all literature is to hold up the mirror of life so that we may study our reflections, but when Black students looked at the mirror held up in American Literature courses the reflections they saw were almost always white. The emphasis on a white reflection is especially evident in the presentation of 19th Century American Literature. A relatively limited number of books by 19th Century Afro-American authors is currently in print and very few are available in inexpensive paperback editions. The standard anthologies used in most college level American Literature survey courses show an almost total neglect of 19th Century Afro-American authors. Of eight major college level American Literature anthologies published during the past decade only one (published by St. Martin's Press) gives more than a token representation of 19th Century Afro-American writers. Most anthologies give recognition to 19th Century Afro-American Literature by publishing a few spirituals and perhaps a brief selection by Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Charles Chesnutt or Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Yet almost all of these anthologies contain the works of a large number of minor white literary figures such as Mary Rowlandson, Samuel Sewall, William Bartnam, Hugh Brackenridge, Anne Bradstreet etc. The justification for including these lesserluminaries was well expressed by the editors of the fourth edition of Volume One of the Norton Anthology, The American Tradition in Literature, when they justified the inclusion of the Puritan poetess, Anne Bradstreet. "When all has been said the prinicpal contribution of Anne Bradstreet to posterity is what she revealed, through herself, of the first generation of New Englanders." Based on the obvious omission of most 19th Century Afro-American writers from these anthologies, we are forced to conclude that the editors must have felt that 19th Century Afro-Americans did not make meaningful revelations about their society. The words of John Lash published in an article in Phylon in 1947 still hold true today:

> It is safe to say .... that the typical anthologist of that version of American Literature which is taught in our secondary schools and colleges has neglected the Negro author.... Most of these anthologies include authors distinctly minor figures in the national literature .... No anthological presentation of American Literature

> which claims to be comprehensive could fail to acknowledge the Negro author on the merit of his creative expression unless the editorship of that presentation consciously neglects to include him.

It is clear that the instructor who wishes to include 19th Century Afro-American writers in his/her literature course must devote considerable time and energy to gathering appropriate materials.

Another approach to the study of Afro-Americans writers is to establish a separate course focusing exclusively on their literary contributions. This was what many Black students of the sixties wanted and many such courses were innovated in the late 60's and early 70's. In the Winter, 1978 issue of Obsidian, Black Literature in Review, I published an article, "Black Literature Courses: 1972 vs. 1977". This article was a report and a comparison of two investigations of Black Literature courses taught in some of the colleges and universities of New York State during two different academic years: 1972-73 and 1977-78. Perhaps the most interesting statistic resulting from this study is that in 1972-73, 76 of the responding registrars said a Black Literature course was being offered at their institution whereas in 1977-78 only 36 made such a claim. However we look at the figures, and allow for variations in institutions responding, there has almost certainly been a decline between 1972 and 1977 in the number of Black Literature courses offered in New York State's colleges and universities. After a brief attempt at an honest presentation of Afro-American literature, most colleges seem to be well on their way to relapsing back to the coverage given such literature in the days before the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's. All instructors of American Literature are involved in presentation of Afro-American Literature-either via transmission or via omission.

The most ignored of Black Literature is that which was written prior to the 20th Century. This has given rise to the myth that whatever quality literature Black people have produced was all written in the 20th Century. This is particularly

unfortunate since much good quality, but greatly ignored literature, was written by 19th Century Afro-Americans.

Perhaps the most outstanding literary contributions of early 19th Century Black writers were the so-called "slave narratives" which are basically autobiographies written by ex slaves describing their lives as slaves. Over eighty were published before the Civil War. From these narratives emerges a picture of slavery as witnessed from the slaves' point of view and one rarely made known to the American reading public. It shows in full measure the brutality and cruelty of the institution of slavery. The degree of uniformity in depicting such subjects as corporal punishment, religious brainwashing, psychological harrassment and sexual abuse indicates that life for slaves was very similar throughout the South. Some of the better known narratives were written by Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Brown, Henry Bibb and Harriet Jacobs.

Also early in the 19th Century folk tales and folk songs were prevalent among Black people. Since it was illegal to teach a slave to read and write, these tales and songs flourished mainly in oral form and were not recorded in writing for posterity until the second half of the 19th Century. The folk tales dealt mainly with the Black man's use of cunning and deception to survive. He needed to "mask" in order to "fool" the white man into getting what he wanted.

Animal fables were commonly narrated to tell in disguised form of the

clever tricks slaves used to outwit their masters.

The first period during which Black writers made major (if ignored) written contributions to the field of American Letters was the 1850's. During this period one play and several novels by Black American authors appeared on the literary scene. The four novels were:

Clotel - William Wells Brown - 1853
The Heroic Slave - Frederick Douglass - 1853
The Garies and Their Friends - Frank Webb - 1857
Blake - Martin Delany - 1859 (final version 1861)

William Wells Brown's play The Escape appeared in 1858.

All of the works are milestones in American literary history. They are the first fictionalized accounts to describe Black American life by those who had experienced that life first hand, namely Black authors. All but The Garies and Their Friends depict the life of the Black slave of the South. The Garies focuses mainly on the life of the free Black man of the North. They all revolve around well organized and well structured plots with well developed central characters. They are written in typical mid 19th Century style which is to say

they frequently contain digressions, sub plots, remarkable coincidences and moralizing by their authors.

All five works emphasize the insecurity of the slave's position in the society in which he finds himself. Clotel, a young quadroon and the alleged daughter of Thomas Jefferson, is sold away from all whom she ever loved: her mother, her sister, her lover and her daughter. Blake's wife, Maggie, is spirited off and sold during Blake's absence from the plantation. A minor character, Winston, in The Garies and Their Friends, is sold as a child away from his mother. In The Heroic Slave, the hero's wife, Susan, is killed while attempting to escape with her husband. The central characters in The Escape have to flee to Canada in order to prevent their separation. These distressing and inhumane situations are vividly and movingly described by the Black authors. The white slave owners and traders show no comprehension of or empathy with the suffering they inflict on their slaves. When Blake learns that his wife has been sold he is distraught. The response of his owner to his distress is: "O Henry, I hope you've

not taken to swearing! I do hope you will not give over to wickedness! Our afflictions should make our faith the stronger." The auctioneer who presided over Clotel's sale sounded much like one who might be auctioning off an AKC registered poodle. "Gentlemen she is worth a great deal more than that . . . . you certainly don't know the value of the article you are bidding upon. Here, gentlemen, I hold in my hand a paper certifying that she has a good moral character." When Garies' uncle learned of Garies' plans to travel North so that he could marry his mulatto mistress, he was dumbfounded. "A more ridiculous whim it is impossible to conceive - the idea is perfectly absurd . . . . and then you would find it difficult to shake her off there, as you could here, in case you wanted to marry another woman." Madison, the main character in The Heroic Slave was severely beaten for staying at a mill longer than anticipated. He tells a white acquaintance, "I had on the previous Saturday, suffered a cruel lashing; had been tied up to the limb of a tree with my feet chained together, and a heavy iron bar placed between my ankles.

Thus suspended, I received on my naked back forty stripes." In The Escape Mrs. Gaines, whose husband has an eye on the slave heroine Melinda, tried to force poor Melinda to drink poison. And so it goes-- The whites are mostly shown as simply refusing to regard the Blacks as humans like themselves.

All of the authors indicate that survival for Blacks in pre Civil War American society depended upon an independent spirit and a reliance on their identity to see them through their hardships, including the use of violence if necessary. In The Heroic Slave Madison decides to lead a mutiny and he is very serious about his venture. In his insurrection the captain and first mate are killed and Madison gives fair warning that a similar fate shall meet any other white sailors who try to stop him. "We do not thirst for your blood, we demand only our rightful freedom . . . . And if you now persist in your resistance to my authority, I give you fair warning, you shall die." Clotel committed the ultimate act of violence: self-destruction. After escaping to the North and freedom, she risked all to retrieve

her daughter but she was apprehended. In her attempt to flee across the Potomac River she found herself trapped on a bridge with a mob at either end. She knew there was no escape and made her decision; "with a single bound she vaulted over the railings of the bridge and sunk forever beneath the waves of the river!" In the Garies and Their Friends a mob threatened to destroy the home of a wealthy Black businessman, Mr. Walters. When he got word of the upcoming attack he sought police protection which was denied. He then decided to protect himself and gave the following instructions to his friends:

> We are not the aggressors, thank God! And the results, be they what they may, are not of our seeking. I have asked protection of the law, and it is too weak or indifferent to give it; so I have no alternative but to protect myself . . . . Wait for their attack by all means. If they throw stones, you'll find plenty in that room with which to return the compliment; if they resort to firearms, then we will do the same; I want to be strictly on the defensive . . . . but at the same time we must defend ourselves fully and energetically.

And this they did. When attacked they retaliated in full measure. Even the children got in on the act. From an upper window of Mr.

Walter's house they poured upon the heads of the approaching mob their own personal concoction of boiling water filled with several pounds of cayenne pepper. The mob beat a hasty retreat and the children were praised for their courage and inventiveness. Blake was so outraged at his helplessness regarding the sale of his wife that he made plans to stimulate a general slave insurrection. To this end he travelled throughout the South preaching rebellion and insurrection to the slaves. Melinda, in The Escape, beat her mistress severely with a broom when the latter tried to physically force her to drink some poison. It is obvious these were not cringing, cowardly slaves busily ingratiating themselves by saying "Yas Suh, Yas Massa." They wanted what we so admire Patrick Henry for wanting "Give me Liberty or Give me Death." The white man's Christianity is given the once over in all of these selections, particularly in Clotel where a slave holding person extols the virtues of slavery. In Clotel a missionary preaches to the slaves and urges them to "take care that you do not fret or murmur, grumble or repine at your condition for this will not only make your life un-

easy, but will greatly offend Almighty God." The Sunday sermon is followed by a catechism lesson of which the following is a sample:

> Q. What command has God given to servants concerning obedience to their masters?
> A. Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye service as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God.
> Q. What does God mean by masters according to the flesh?
> A. Masters in this world.

Among the parson's slaves is one who has read the Bible and he informs the other slaves, "Thar's more in de Bible den dat, only Snyder never reads any other part to us." Blake is also of the opinion that the white slaveholder uses the Bible to suit his purposes. Blake tells his followers, "They use the Scriptures to make you submit, by preaching to you the texts of obedience to your masters." The hypocrisy of Northern Christians is evident in The Garies and Their Friends. The white minister who is to perform the marriage ceremony between Garie and Emily refuses to go through with the proceedings. He says to Garie:

> I do not believe in the propriety of amalgamation and on no consideration could I be induced to assist in the union

> of a white man or woman with a person who has the slightest infusion of African blood in their veins . . . . you must be laboring under some horrible infatuation.

After Mrs. Garie's death she is refused burial in the white cemetery, a fact which astonishes and outrages the Garies' white attorney whom Mr. Walters considers quite naive.

> They refuse us permission to kneel by the side of the white communicants at the Lord's Supper, and give us separate pews in obscure corners of their churches. All this you know - why, then, be surprised that they carry their prejudices into their graveyards? - the conduit is all of a piece.

The hypocrisy of slave owning Christians is particularly obvious in The Escape in Mrs. Gaines' speech to a servant with whom she is displeased (for asking a question that annoyed her).

> Now, Hannah, brother Pinchen (a minister) is gone, do you get the cowhide and follow me to the cellar, and I'll whip you well for aggravating me as you have to-day. It seems as if I can never sit down to take a little comfort with the Lord, without you crossing me. The devil always puts its into your head to disturb me, just when I am trying to serve the Lord. I've no doubt but that I'll miss going to heaven on your account. But I'll whip you well before I leave this world, that I will. Git the cowhide and follow me to the cellar.

The cruelty of these God fearing white Christians is most dramatically expressed when a white Northerner in The Heroic Slave sees his first slave gang on their way to market.

> A sad sight truly. Here were one hundred and thirty human beings - children of a common Creator - guilty of no crime - men and women, with hearts, minds, and deathless spirits, chained and fettered and bound for market in a christian country.

The Black writers whose works we have been examining depicted the lives of Black Americans of the mid 19th Century harshly and realistically. They dealt with all aspects of their lives including violence. But white audiences of that time (and perhaps this) were not ready to listen. They preferred (and prefer) the sentimentality of that best seller of the 1850's, Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. The white reading public has been ready to weep over the pitiful Blacks portrayed in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin published in 1850. Who would not cry over the tragic death of Uncle Tom or sympathize with Eliza's dangerous escape across the ice to freedom in the North? White audiences were ready to cry over Blacks who

ran away from threatening situations or who were willing to die quietly for what they believed in. But based on book consumption it appears that white readers were not ready to accept Blacks who were willing to fight for what they believed in.

The latter half of the 19th Century saw two Black writers attain some measure of literary prominence, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt. The initial popularity of both of these men with white audiences was due primarily to their focus, early in their careers, on folk tales and folk ways.

Dunbar's early poetry was mostly dialect verse. The Black narrator in most of these poems was presented as a rather good natured, folksy fellow. In listening to a political rally the narrator in "Speakin' at De Cou'thouse" says:

> But hit did seem so't o'funny
> Aftah waitin' fu' a week
> Dat de people kep' on shoutin'
> So de man des coundn't speak;

Based on Dunbar's success, white audiences apparently enjoyed this

type of narrator. He was naive, even childish, but pleasantly so and this view fed their idealized, but degrading picture of the Black man. Famous 19th Century author and literary critic, William Dean Howells, praised Dunbar's dialect poetry. Even today many critics view Dunbar in the same light as Howells did. They either dismiss or do not take seriously his non dialect poetry. But as the well known Black scholar, Darwin Turner, wrote, Dunbar's work is "much more a part of the protest tradition than his reputation suggests." Granted, protest had to be subtly made in the late 19th Century but it was made. This protest can be seen in the poem "Sympathy":

> I know why the caged bird beats his wings
> Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
> For he must fly back to his perch and cling
> When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
> And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars.

Maya Angelou used the lines "I know why the caged bird sings" as a title for her autobiography. Clearly the caged bird is the Black man who is trying desperately to secure his <u>real</u> freedom while the pains of the old scars still throb. In "We Wear the Mask" Dunbar

transmits a pride in his Black identity and a refusal to let the white man see how much he has made the Black man suffer.

> Why should the world be over-wise,
> In counting all our tears and sighs?
> Nay, let them only see us, while
> We wear the mask.

This non dialect, subtle protest poetry of Dunbar was not nearly as well received as his folk poetry.

Writing poetry did not prove very lucrative, so Dunbar turned to the writing of fiction. He published four collections of short stories and four novels. Many of his stories and three of his novels, like his dialect poetry, have a pastoral setting and deal with Blacks in a local color atmosphere. Once again it was the "stuff" whites could read without having to deal with their consciences. In his later stories the trickster theme emerges in which a Black character frequently outwits a white one. Perhaps the best story of this type is "The Scapegoat." The plot revolves around Robinson Asbury, a Black political boss who betrays his white cronies. He is jailed for a

year, but upon his release he secretly works to destroy his white opponents. He gets out the Black vote after regaining the trust of his white cronies who expect Asbury has been working for them amongst the Black voters. Just the opposite has been the case and Asbury has his revenge. No violent or even outright protest came from Dunbar. His literary career would have been finished had that been the case. But that does not mean he was content with the Black man's role in America and some of his works are indeed subtle forms of protest.

Charles Chesnutt's first published book was a collection of folk tales, The Conjur Woman. Black folk tales had previously been collected and published by Joel Chandler Harris in the Uncle Remus Tales, but The Conjur Woman is the first collection of such tales published by a Black author. The book was well received, and like Dunbar, Chesnutt came under the wings of William Dean Howells. As time went on Chesnutt became more and more cynical. This cynicism is already clearly evident in some of the stories in his second collection, The

Wife of His Youth and Other Stories. In a number of the stories in this collection he takes to task those Blacks who try to emulate whites. He creates a society called "The Blue Veins" whose members pride themselves on their light skin and genteel ways. They are usually brought up short and either forced to face their Black heritage or, if they refuse to do so, they emerge as fools. Perhaps one of the most moving stories in this collection is "The Bouquet." A little Black girl has worshipped her white teacher who becomes ill and dies. The child is heartbroken and wishes to pay her last respects, but the bigotted mother of the deceased teacher refuses to have any Blacks in her home. The child wishes to take a bouquet to the grave, but Blacks aren't allowed in the cemetery, so the child gives the bouquet to the teacher's dog who places it at the grave site. The irony is obvious. In his novels Chesnutt became increasingly bitter. In The House Behind the Cedars the proud white hero refuses to marry his fiancee when he learns of her African ancestry. Not only does he refuse to marry her, but he despises her for lying to him. She

eventually dies of illness brought on by grief. In the Marrow of Tradition Chesnutt created Josh Green, a laborer who planned to settle, by violence, if necessary an old account he had with one of the town's negro haters. The story culminates in a race riot in which the two kill each other. The central Black character is a doctor who acts independently and saves the white child of his wife's half sister only after she implores him to. They confront the white couple with pride and full knowledge they have the upper hand. The novel certainly does not provide a very optimistic view of the nation's race relations and it was not a financial success for Chesnutt. White readers preferred the tales of The Conjur Woman.

Black American writers of the 19th Century wrote of Black life as they saw and experienced it, sometimes directly, sometimes subtly. At no time in our history have white readers read with much enthusiasm of the dismal racial situation that has existed in our country since the days of slavery. This has led to the widespread neglect of some very fine authors whose works, hopefully, will receive more attention in years to come.

When Roots first appeared on TV a Syracuse Herald Journal review included the following statment:

> Haley has also succeeded in confronting Americans with our history of slavery in a way never done before. At last one reads of real people who were real slaves. We are confronted too with the fact of the slave ownership of Presidents Washington and Jefferson, though few Americans have thought in the past of "Massa George Washington," as Haley's ancestors referred to him.

If we as readers are only now reading about "real people who were real slaves," it is our fault, not the fault of Black American writers. All through the 18th Century and the 19th Centuries Black American writers, often with literary skill and expertise, described what it was like to be a Black person in early America, but America has apparently not been listening.

To continue to deny Americans the knowledge of the literary contributions of early Black American writers is to continue to deny all of us a true understanding of our heritage. Many changes must come about if incidents such as those that occurred in Miami are to cease. Not least among these changes is the development of the nation's respect for and pride in the intellectual accomplishments of its Black citizens. All instructors of American Literature have a big role to play in bringing this change about.